

Communication: The Vitality of Relationships

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Abstract

This discussion of communication in dyadic relationships focuses on the definition of successful communication as well as its importance. When couples can go beyond information sharing and express deeper thoughts and feelings on a variety of issues, the results can include individual growth as well as a stronger bond between the couple. Couples should be aware of two primary types of communication--verbal and nonverbal. Several factors affect the success of transmissions including commitment, family background, skill level, gender, compatibility, and setting. "I messages" and reflective listening can aid couples in communicating during conflict. Other techniques such as establishing a relationship constitution, creating love maps, using word pictures, being direct, and staying positive can help couples enhance their communication.

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Communication: The Vitality of Relationships

Introduction

A couple sits down for a meal together. “How was your day?” followed by the response “Fine.” Plastic words. The couple has experienced “communication” because, according to Webster, communication involves “a giving or exchanging of information.” But have they truly communicated? After all, Webster also states that “to have a meaningful relationship” and “to be connected” are necessary if communication is to occur. Webster hints at the idea that there are different levels of communication. More accurately, I believe, communication can be viewed as a spectrum ranging from simple exchanges of information to deeper exchanges of thoughts and feelings. The type of communication people use with each other varies depending on the type of relationship they share. Couples involved in intimate relationships often fall into the pattern of using communicative styles appropriate for non-intimate relationships when they could be experiencing much deeper transmissions.

Time and time again, people agree on the importance of communication in relationships, as if success could come simply through awareness. But nearly every failed relationship is accompanied by the claim, “We just couldn’t communicate.” Individuals who use this excuse repeatedly may overlook their need for communication knowledge by blaming the difficulties on incompatibility or fate. Granted, some couples do not communicate well because they are incompatible or because their relationship was not “meant to be,” but such reasons are often overused as justification for communication failure. People seldom recognize that achieving success in communication is a complicated process. The difficulty or ease of the communication process in a

relationship depends on many factors, such as each individual's family background, skill level, gender, compatibility, and setting.

I myself can attest to the fact that communicating well in a relationship is easier said than done. Barriers often present themselves and hinder the ability two people have to connect. For example, one person in a relationship may desire a much deeper level of communication than the other and not be satisfied with exclusively simple exchanges. On the other hand, even if two people desire to communicate at the same level, difficulties may arise if couples are unskilled. Many couples are unaware of some of the simplest communication techniques, such as the use of "I" statements, that can aid them in conflict. After years of playing "hinting games" formally known as "magical knowing" (Crosby, 1991, p. 88), in a relationship, I feel that I can support the claim that most communication difficulties stem from ignorance. I, like many other people, did not realize that I lacked some of the most basic communication skills. I had never heard of "fair fighting skills" (Knox and Schacht, 2000, p. 210), so I had to learn the hard way.

Although success in communication is more difficult to achieve than one may initially think, it is by no means unobtainable. The earlier that couples become aware of their need for communication skills, the earlier they will gain them and experience the benefits of interaction. Good communication results in more contentment for a couple with themselves and each other. The human need to understand and be understood can be fulfilled when a person can communicate intimately in a relationship with someone else. Vitality is brought into a relationship when two people can share experiences and grow as a result of connecting through communication.

Definition

As noted earlier, communication can be viewed as a spectrum ranging from the simple exchange of information to a deeper process of connection through sharing thoughts and feelings. According to Knox and Schacht (2000), “Communication can be defined as the process of exchanging information and feelings between two people” (p. 206). This definition emphasizes that both ends of the spectrum are necessary for communicating in a relationship. Couples need to communicate day to day information as well as to share thoughts and feelings. While sharing information is usually the easiest way for people to communicate, sharing on an emotional level is more challenging. While a basic definition of communication could involve either type of exchange, the definition of successful communication in intimate relationships must involve both information sharing and expressing feelings.

Smalley supports this idea in his discussion of the levels of communication that spouses may encounter. He explains that “your goal is to move through the first three somewhat superficial levels of verbal communication and get down to the more intimate fourth level, where you find out what your mate feels, and finally to the fifth level, where you discover what he or she needs” (Smalley, 1996, p. 157). Communication which enters the fourth and fifth levels allows a couple to grow in love, which to Smalley (1996) implies success in a relationship, as we all desire to love and be loved. Knox and Schacht (2000) agree that if a couple desires more intimacy, communication must involve deeper sharing.

No doubt, successful communication in a dyadic relationship involves interactions where significant sharing occurs. Powell (1969) states that “communication refers to a

process by which someone or something is made common, that is, it is shared” (p. 7). In order for a connection to occur between two people, being on the same “wavelength” must characterize their interactions. Nadig stresses that understanding each other is important in accomplishing such success. He states that “Effective communication exists between two people when the receiver interprets and understands the sender’s message in the same way the sender intended it” (Nadig, “Tips,” 1999, p. 1). No couple can communicate successfully one hundred percent of the time, but the likelihood of success will increase if they understand each other through sharing. Successful communication for a couple, then, involves more emotional, deeper interactions that surpass the simple exchange of information.

Effects

The effects of successful communication in intimate relationships are extremely important. It brings life, individual growth, relationship endurance, love, and intimacy to the couple. Hendricks and Hendricks (1995) explain one effect of successful communication in the following way: the interaction stops arguments and increases each person’s “sense of aliveness” (p. 20). Their effect is to bring zest to the lives of persons involved. Supporting this view, Wright (1995) states that “Your communication is the lifeblood of your relationship. When it’s gone, so is your relationship” (p. 214). One of the reasons people marry is to have a companion—someone to share life with. In order to have a companionship marriage that is healthy and lasting, a couple has to be able to communicate, especially about their relationship itself (Mace & Mace, 1988, p. 61). Powell (1996) claims with confidence that “It is certain that a relationship will be only as good as its communication” (p. 43). If partners successfully communicate, they can

experience animation in their relationship by encouraging each other to reach full potential as each person expresses himself or herself.

In order for individuals to realize such potential, a true communication “encounter” must be experienced; otherwise relationships become subject-object in nature (Powell, 1969, p. 49). Such an encounter involves more than simple information sharing. Depth is necessary in communicating because if we do not have it, “It is the death warrant for happiness and human fulfillment” (Powell, 1969, p. 49).

Fulfillment comes when individuals realize who they are through communication. When people tell others who they are, it helps them realize the truth about themselves, and this discovery is necessary so that they can act in accordance with their true selves (Powell, 1969, p. 44). “It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood” (Powell, 1969, p. 5). When each person in a relationship can understand the other, the result is that a person’s life acquires meaning as he or she is filled with new awareness, deeper feelings, and broadened horizons (Powell, 1969). The effect of successful communication goes beyond developing the couple as an entity, and serves as a way for individuals to self-actualize.

When interactions occur that allow individuals to be understood, there is room for growth. Before growth can occur, each person in a relationship has to be able to know himself or herself and then let the other person get to know that self. “If you and I can honestly tell each other who we are, that is, what we think, judge, feel, value, love, honor, and esteem, hate, fear, desire, hope for, believe in and are committed to, then and then only can each of us grow” (Powell, 1969, p. 44). So, self-knowledge and the ability to

communicate this knowledge to another can encourage self-definition. If a person can feel free to share who he or she is with others, increased confidence in the person will result. It is natural for fulfillment to follow after such growth. In a marriage relationship, this fulfillment is particularly important because "Happily married persons are generally healthier, . . . emotionally more stable and mature, . . . live longer, are more creative and productive, make more money and manage it better, and contribute more of themselves to the community" (Glover, 1964, p. 3). Successful communication is significant in relationships because it has obvious benefits not only for the individuals involved but also for the communities to which they belong.

The importance of successful communication as the lifeblood of a relationship cannot be stressed enough, especially in a marriage relationship, as it serves as an act of divorce prevention. "Recent statistics suggest that 50% of all marriages will end in divorce" ("Divorce," 2000, p. 1) Many people divorce (indicating failure) because of lack of communication in marriage (Glover, 1964, pp. 50, 57). Even if a couple does not divorce after withstanding poor communication, the result is harmful for their relationship. "If their feelings and thoughts can't be communicated on day to day basis, though the couple continue to live together, they will drift apart in terms of their interpersonal relationship" (Mace & Mace, 1988, p. 61). Since an aim of marriage, for some, is to connect intimately with someone, such drifting would be detrimental to the purpose of the relationship. Hendricks and Hendricks (1995) agree that "When the flow of feelings is open and clear, a balance of harmony and purpose is easily maintained. When feelings are withheld, the relationship flounders" (p. 23). Indeed, how well a

couple can communicate is a major factor in determining whether their marriage is a success or failure. The same principle applies to other intimate relationships.

Communicating in a way that fulfills the individuals through growth also develops love in a relationship and increases intimacy. Powell (1969) stresses the importance of people experiencing such affirmations as he explains that “he who is understood and loved will grow as a person; he who is estranged will die in his cell of solitary confinement, alone” (p. 96). If one reason people marry is out of their desire to love and be loved, good communication may help insure a continuation of love.

“Forever-love is built on communication that gets to the heart of what both people feel and need” (Smalley, 1996, p. 157). Love can be described as a state one reaches where the security and satisfaction of another person is just as important as the security and satisfaction of oneself. Wanting things to be pleasing for someone else also describes what loving someone involves (Kammeyer, 1981). Love is important to have in a marriage relationship in some cultures because “romantic love is the basis of marital happiness and happiness is essential for the continuance of a marriage,” according to Kammeyer (1981, p. 64). To foster such love in a close relationship, communication of feelings is necessary.

Involvement in a relationship is not enough to bring love and fulfillment into a person’s life. Many people have this misconception and overlook the importance of communicating their true selves. Such interaction requires vulnerability, and thus, involves taking a risk—overcoming the fear of possible rejection. “Mace (1982) argues that relationship depth is essential for the couple to achieve the ‘true intimacy’ that results from being able to feel safe and be completely vulnerable in the presence of each other”

(Cole & Cole, 1999, p. 2). Truly, “To become more intimate with one’s partner, one must become intimate with oneself. As one ‘unblocks’ the connection to one’s inner self, one dissolves the barriers to connecting with the ‘greater-than-self’” (Wright, 1998, p. 7). Intimacy comes from communicating more than just facts. One can see how taking this risk with another person who agrees to the same challenge can be rewarding. In Canary’s and Stafford’s research, communicating on a daily basis can “lead to greater satisfaction, commitment, and love” (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999, p. 1). Communicating has an effect on the development of the self as well as on the development of the couple.

Forms

The way in which a couple communicates is a key to success. "A behavioral approach to marital communication implies a concern for the content and means (verbal and non-verbal) of communication" (Knox, 1972, p. 58). It is important for a couple to communicate using appropriate verbal and non-verbal approaches. “Although verbal behavior is often related to nonverbal behavior and may also provide clues about the speaker’s internal state, it is first and foremost important in its own right” (Thomas, 1977, p. 2). Verbal behavior in relationships is observable and measurable, so it may be the easiest form of communication for individuals in a relationship to interpret. Thomas (1977) explains that two purposes of verbal communication are sending messages to give information and behavioral guidance which involves “holding the attention of the listener, having him track adequately what the speaker says, sustaining appropriate amounts of speech when the listener talks, and maintaining necessary continuity of the themes of content covered in the interchanges” (p. 10). Understanding the speaker and

responding appropriately are crucial in the process of communicating successfully (Adams, 7 November 2001).

While verbal communication serves the purpose of expressing factual and cognitive processes, nonverbal communication focuses on:

providing information; regulating interaction through turn-taking sequences; expressing intimacy; social control in terms of exercising persuasive influence by increasing or decreasing the level of a given nonverbal behavior to achieve a desirable state of interaction involvement; and service-task, in which levels of behavioral involvement are impersonal and reflect the consequence of a service or task relationship as opposed to a social relationship. (Honeycutt & Wiemann, 1999, p.2)

Undoubtedly, nonverbal communication composes a large portion of communication. Goldsmith (2000) notes that “Communication experts estimate that as many as 93 percent of the messages sent and received are made up of nonverbal symbols . . . “ (p. 150). Six components of nonverbal communication are artifacts (objects in relation to a person), proxemics (distance between the speaker and listener), body language (gestures), physical characteristics (the individual’s body), clothing, and touching behavior (Goldsmith, 2000, p. 151). Each of these components contributes to the successfulness of couple interaction by affecting messages sent.

Nonverbal communication for couples is especially important because feelings can be expressed without words in a most powerful way. Facial expressions, gestures, and noises are important parts of this type of communication (Mace & Mace, 1988, p. 22). Most people value feelings of romantic love in a relationship, especially that of

marriage, so it is no surprise that a communication of such feelings is important.

"Partners who feel affectionate toward each other almost always communicate better than those who do not feel this way" (Glover, 1964, p.60). Affection, respect, love, and admiration all appear to be synonymous when it comes to non-verbal expression of feelings. Such expressions are significant because they are not commonly expressed to everyone, but rather one's partner alone. Allowing a spouse to feel significant and exclusive from the way others are treated helps him or her to feel important and loved.

Holding hands, kissing, and hugging express feelings of love without words. These physical comforts show companionship and respect between partners which is essential in a marriage relationship (Glover, 1964, p.61). With regards to marriage, which is in many ways a companionship, part of what makes such a situation special is a comfort which is unique and different for each couple. It is important for couples to communicate affection nonverbally in their relationship early on, especially if a couple is not married but hopes to be. The ability of a couple to express affection usually does not change after marriage (Glover, 1964, pp. 60-61). Evidence suggests that nonverbal behavior is more difficult to change than verbal as well (Thomas, 1977, p. 3). In a discussion of Kahn's research on nonverbals (1970), Perlman and Duck (1987) state that "He found clear evidence for happy couples being superior to unhappy couples in their ability to decode each other's nonverbal cues" (p. 150). It is, therefore, important for a couple to be aware of the need to establish effective nonverbal communication since it carries so much weight in expression.

Content

If successful communication through verbal and nonverbal communication is necessary for a couple to prosper, then any increase or improvement in their communication would be beneficial. One study indicated that “the average married couple spends just four and a half minutes a day talking to each other. So anything they can do to increase that amount will help” (Humphrey, 1998, p. 1). Four and a half minutes suggests that many couples do little more than exchange information, considering that this is an essential part of daily life, especially when a couple lives together. “Too often, couples just talk about things—the events of the day, who has to pick up whom from practice . . .” (Humphrey, 1998, p. 2). While these exchanges are important, they do little to contribute to the relationship’s vitality. Couples need to brainstorm ways to broaden the content of their interactions in order to prosper.

Brainstorming could help couples realize that their dialogues can contain thoughts and feelings on a wide variety of topics. Some of these topics include:

money, sex, affection, work, attention shown to family members, behavioral control, member privacy, child management, relationships with relatives, social activities outside the home, the handling of alcohol and drugs, religion, politics, allocation of time together, division of labor of family members, family decision making, and communication among family members. (Thomas, 1977, p.2).

Communicating thoughts about various issues can develop intellectual intimacy in a relationship. Some of these issues are life after death, premarital sex, divorce, roles of women, homosexuality, death penalty, and gun control (“Intellectual,” 1995, p. 31).

Often, an individual’s opinions on such issues can lead to more detailed conversations

about why the person thinks a certain way. Answers to such why questions can help partners have a better understanding of each other. They may even find that such understanding brings them together. After all, “Communication is the only avenue to communion,” the union of two people, which is necessary in intimate relationships (Powell, 1969, p. 47).

Communicating feelings about daily events that occur as well as in relation to various issues should compose couple interactions. Reinforcing the importance of open interaction, Powell (1969) claims, “I have to be free and able to say my thoughts to you, to tell you about my judgments and values, to expose to you my fears and frustrations, to admit to you my failures and shames, to share my triumphs, before I can really be sure what it is that I am and can become” (p. 44). Many couples focus more on communication when problems arise, in order to solve them through talking, but Powell (1969) states that we should not just be focused on problems and solutions when we think about communicating (p. 46). We should focus on sharing with each other about ourselves in order to fulfill the purpose of interactions—to bring people together in ways that benefit them personally.

Levels

In order for a couple to enhance their conversations by expanding the content of their interactions, it may be helpful for them to think in terms of levels. Nadig (“Tips,” 1999) points out that four different levels of communication can be used: clichés; facts; thoughts and beliefs; and feelings and emotions. Determining which level one’s partner is using in communication is important because “Failing to recognize the level most relevant and important to the speaker can lead to a kind of crossed wires where the two

people are not on the same wavelength” (Nadig, “Tips,” 1999, p. 2). In an intimate relationship, successful communication must be appropriate for the situation. Individuals must realize which level their partners are communicating on in order to respond appropriately.

Including Nadig’s four levels, Smalley (1996) discusses five levels of communication: clichés, facts, opinions, feelings, and needs (p. 142). Similarly, Powell (1969) identifies five levels: cliché, reporting facts about others, personal ideas and judgments, feelings, and gut-level communication (pp. 54-62). In each sequence, the progression of communication deepens as more levels are approached. While Nadig (1999, “Tips”) emphasizes the significance of understanding at which level a person’s partner is communicating, Smalley (1996) and Powell (1969) stress the importance of couples including the fourth and fifth levels in their interactions. Smalley (1996) describes the levels as progressing from superficial to meaningful and claims that in a marriage, “the more often a husband and wife reach and remain on the fourth and fifth levels, the more satisfying their marriage” (p. 142). This concept reinforces the need for couples to communicate the deeper and more vulnerable parts of themselves.

In a simpler fashion, Mace and Mace (1988) define three levels of communication: nonverbal, informational verbal, and sharing inner thoughts and feelings (p. 62). They also designate deeper level communication as a necessity in a companionship (p. 64). If a couple can acknowledge the different levels of communication, it may make it easier for them to accurately assess or monitor the quality of their transmissions (Smalley, 1996, p. 156). This is not to say that a couple must constantly assess what level they are communicating at, but instead the acknowledgment

could serve as a check. If a couple starts to experience less satisfaction in conversation, knowledge of the different communication levels may help them evaluate how well they communicate and help them make necessary adjustments.

Influencing Factors

Awareness of the importance of communication as well as commitment to a relationship are major factors in determining success. Even if a couple's awareness and commitment is high, however, other factors can affect their ability to connect. These factors include: family background, skill level, gender, compatibility, and setting. A myth that many couples believe about a marriage relationship is that they do not bring family influence with them: "On the contrary, both partners are the product of generations of socialization, rules, rituals, processes of interaction, and patterns of coping" (Crosby, 1991, p. 90). There is no doubt that how individuals communicated is learned, and patterns learned from one's family of origin tend to be repeated (Adams, 31 October 2000). Patterns may involve how couples handle disagreements. For example, if one person in a relationship comes from a family where yelling to resolve conflict was used and their partner's family did not, the difference between the two could cause problems ("I'm not yelling!," 1995, p. 1). Although family influence can affect how well a couple communicates together, it is not impossible to change learned patterns if problems do arise (Adams, 31 October 2000). This change would be difficult if a couple has very different backgrounds, but is by no means impossible (Adams, 31 October 2000).

Another factor that affects the success of couple interactions is the skill level of both partners. Crosby (1991) emphasizes communication as a skill that is developed. If

skill is lacking in this area, it could cause relationship problems. “Conflicts frequently are seen to arise directly from, or be exacerbated by, the lack of communication skills on the part of one or both spouses” (Burleson & Denton, 1997, p.1). In addition, “Both theorists and practioners see a lack of communication skills as contributing to the most serious marital problems including violence and abuse” (Burleson & Denton, 1997, p.1). Although skill level is related to communication success and couple satisfaction, Burleson & Denton (1997) found that other variables such as each partner’s gender and motivation contribute to success or failure as well. In other words, communication skill alone does not determine the success of interactions. Instead, a combination of many factors affect success.

Gender is a third factor that affects couple communication. “Researchers generally accept that men and women communicate differently . . .” (Goldsmith, 2000, p. 156). Typically, men focus on information and activities while women focus on emotion and interaction (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 216-17). Smalley (1996) points out that although not all women and men fall under stereotypes, these generalizations are true 70% to 80% of the time (p. 185). He mentions additional differences such as men tend to be independent and women tend to be interdependent; men connect by doing things and women connect by talking; men tend to compete and women tend to cooperate; and men tend to be controlling while women tend to remain agreeable (Smalley, 1996, p. 187-92). The reason for such differences may be attributed to many factors “ranging from biological differences, parental influence, education, and birth order to cultural conditioning by society, the media, and history” (Gray, 1992, p. 7). The cause of such differences is not as important as acknowledging and working through such differences,

if they are present, in order to achieve harmony in a relationship. Gray (1992) explains that a source of conflict in communication is forgetting that men and women are different (p. 10). Couples need to be admit their differences and work toward compromise.

While gender differences play a role in successful communication, compatibility in personality and learning-styles also affects the quality of transmissions (Wright, 1995, p. 215). If two people are very different in their need for conversation, for example, one partner could end up disappointed with the other by not having a conversational need met (Harley, 2000, p. 1). Wright explains that couples can become more compatible by learning their partners' communication preferences—whether a person speaks literally or not, whether he or she talks a lot or a little, and what the primary communication preference is (visual, auditory, or feeling) (Wright, 1995, p. 215-218). If a couple is compatible in the way they communicate, the likelihood of partners understanding each other and being satisfied with their transmissions increases.

Although couples can learn to understand how their partners communicate, compatibility in other areas will make communication easier to begin with. In the case of one couple, Carol and Steve, improving communication through counseling was not enough to sustain their marriage (Lazarus, 2000, p. 3). Counseling helped them communicate because “In the place of blaming, judging, accusing, faultfinding, demanding, and attacking, they now used praise, compliments, discussions, and displayed good listening skills” (Lazarus, 2000, p. 3). Although therapy helped this couple learn to communicate better, it was very hard work and their differences eventually caused them to divorce. When Steve remarried, later, he claimed that he never had to implement the

techniques he learned because he and his wife “just [got] along” (Lazarus, 2000, p. 4).

Lazarus (2000) explains that:

Marriage counseling can make good marriages even better by training couples to enhance their listening skills and their positive communication styles and by teaching a constructive process for resolving conflict Nevertheless, conjugal joy will be seriously undermined when couples differ vis-a-vis child rearing . . . sexual tastes and preferences, money matters, people, food, recreation, politics, religion, and other basic values. (Lazarus, 2000, p. 4)

Crosby (1991) also notes that a “rational matching of interests and values” (p. 88) is important in the success of a relationship. If couples find themselves in an argument, the more things they have in common, the more likely a resolution can be reached. Since the opinions both people in a relationship have on issues can directly affect decisions which both people make, and opinions are often difficult to change once established, compromise is easier when the couple already holds similar views. Likewise, compatibility in terms of personality may also play a role in the ease of interaction for a couple as “personality meshing probably determines the future of the relationship established by a couple” (Wright, 1995, p. 96). If two people’s personalities mesh well, it may be easier for them to understand one another and communicate successfully.

Lastly, setting can have an impact on how well a couple communicates.

Goldsmith (2000) remarks that “The importance of setting cannot be overestimated” (p. 147). Partners must be aware of what is occurring in the environment in order to ensure the most effective interactions possible. In order for couples to communicate intimately,

other distractions must be set aside. A couple should interact in a “pleasant atmosphere—over a cup of coffee, a drive together, or an unhurried meal” (“Intellectual,” 1995, p. 31). This type of environment would allow a couple to enter the fourth and fifth levels of communication more easily. Cole and Cole (1999) agree on “the importance of creating and maintaining a safe environment so that [a couple’s] relationship may be nurtured” (p.4). Each of the factors mentioned above contributes to the success or failure of the communication between persons in a relationship.

Conflict

Couples definitely need to talk every day about common thoughts and feelings, but they also need to talk when troubles arise. “The most demanding aspect of clear communication is maintaining it in times of conflict and upset . . .” (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1995, p. 20). If a couple sees the need for communication in conflict and practices successful resolution, their relationship will benefit from their efforts. Studies show that the way couples handle conflict is the most important factor in determining whether or not they stay together” (Rice, 1997, p. 96). Being able to communicate and accept differences in opinion is important in the success of a marriage.

A couple will always have differences when it comes down to the smallest details of living. Such details include eating, living, and studying or work habits. “Adaptability in matters like these is the important thing, but if neither of the couple is adaptable, it is well that they consider carefully how closely their ideals of comfortable home life coincide” (Hart & Hart, 1935, p. 118). It is important for a couple to recognize differences and communicate their feelings about such small matters so they can successfully handle situations. It is not uncommon for two married people, for example,

to take different views on various subjects. By talking and realizing that differences can be acceptable, adaptation can occur and "two different viewpoints can live side by side and respect each other" (Betcher & Macauley, 1990, p. 262). Again, the more compatible a couple is, the more issues they will agree on; however, some differences will exist regardless of how well matched a couple is.

Compromise sometimes needs to occur in certain situations and is only accomplished when a couple can willingly talk about what is bothersome. When one person has a problem with his or her spouse's opinions or behavior, talking things out is helpful, but only when both people are willing to listen and make adjustments in order to resolve conflicts. "With life comes change, and the ability to adjust to change, handle stress in a positive manner, and ask for help when it is needed is essential . . ."

("Improving," n.p.). If partners desire to provide emotional support and satisfaction for one another, communicating well in conflicts can help ensure positive outcomes.

Even if individuals cannot identify the source of their emotions, Powell (1969) claims that it is best to communicate them. "I might be saying, 'I don't know why this bothers me, but it does . . . I guess that I am just hypersensitive, and I really don't mean to imply that it is your fault, but I do feel hurt by what you are saying'" (p. 66-67). It is important to express feelings, especially negative ones, so they do not resurface and later explode. There are times when individuals do not need to express emotions, but "In the case of two people, however, who must work or live together or who want to relate deeply, this emotional reporting at the time of the emotions is vitally important" (Powell, 1969, p. 79). This idea suggests that expressing feelings in conflict is necessary in order

for couples to relate on a deeper level, which is crucial in maintaining an intimate relationship.

When partners express their feelings to each other, couples must remember that it is difficult to compromise when one person begins to blame rather than listen to the other. "The only remedy is for both to take responsibility without blame" (Betcher & Macauley, 1990, p. 262). It appears to be true that while some habits are difficult to break, talking to one's spouse about the problem can help one to see the other side or reach an agreement rather than an argument. Arguments occur when both people shut off communication by forgetting to do this. A good way for couples to talk about problems and limit blame is through the use of "I messages" (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 208). I messages contain three parts: statement of speaker's feelings, description of the other person's behavior, and the consequence of the behavior for the speaker (Adams, 1 November 2000). For example, "Rather than say, 'You are always late and irresponsible' (which is a 'you' statement), you might respond with, 'I get upset when you are late and will feel better if you call me when you will be delayed'" (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 209). Nadig (1999, "How") claims that using I statements can help couples express feelings in a way that reduces conflict (pp. 2-3).

Although couples must express feelings to each other, Betcher and Macauley (1990) state that "ventilation is only helpful if the other person is listening and able to validate you. It doesn't work if both are ventilating at the same time" (p. 275). When one partner is expressing emotions in conflict, it is important for the other person to understand everything that is being said. Bloomfield (1993) suggests that the "Tell Me More" technique be used to elicit everything from the individual who is venting (p. 24).

This is a way to encourage one's partner to express his or her feelings fully and clearly, while trying to remain calm. It also encourages individuals to avoid interrupting, which causes more anger rather than further resolution (Bloomfield, 1993, p. 24). Using this technique can help prevent arguments from escalating since the listener is not responding immediately in defensiveness, but expressing patience and respect toward the venting partner (Bloomfield, 1993, p. 24).

Listening to one's partner is key in communicating successfully in conflict. Active or reflective listening is effective because it involves giving one's partner feedback to be sure he or she is understood before responding (Nadig, "Tips," 1999, p. 2). It is helpful to listen to the other person and feedback the points which he or she has made after they have vented before jumping to conclusions. Knox and Schacht (2000) point out that reflective listening can be difficult if the speaker has criticized the listener. When this is the case, they suggest that the listener give feedback in the form of an apology such as "I am so sorry for being inconsiderate. I had no intention of hurting you . . ." (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 208). Since many arguments occur due to misunderstandings, reflective listening is useful because it promotes a clear understanding between partners during a conversation. If each person can avoid assuming meanings past what the other has said by using reflective listening, results will be positive. If a couple can do these things their marriage is more likely to succeed (Betcher & Macauley, 1990, p. 269).

Successful communication in relationships not only helps to limit the number of arguments which escalate, it also turns negative situations into positive ones. When a couple can learn to successfully listen to and understand each other, failure is not present even though a problem does come up. When a conflict arises, working through it

strengthens a relationship because you have grown closer by confiding in and understanding another person ("Getting," 1996, p. 4). It has been noted that satisfaction is not something acquired automatically in an intimate relationship like marriage. After working through difficulties a couple can "hold all the delight and satisfaction of having won through one of the strongest of all the trials in life--the conflicts with someone you love" (Betcher & Macauley, 1990, p. 271). Communicating verbally is thus very important in resolving conflict, whether simple or complex. Since differences in opinion will be present between two people, understanding and working through some of the problems together can be very rewarding. One of the best ways to become closer to someone is learning more about them and respecting differences in a successful way.

Other Communication Techniques

There are many techniques which exist to aid couples in communicating well. While many of these methods are critical in conflict resolution, they can also be used in everyday interactions to help couples build a more effective communication system. Some important principles include establishing a relationship constitution, creating love maps, using word pictures, being direct, and positively reinforcing one another. The first, a relationship constitution, is "a written listing of the most important things you and your loved ones want out of your relationship every day" (Smalley, 1996, p. 147). A marriage constitution, specifically, consists of the feelings and needs a couple wants to keep in their relationship. Smalley (1996) explains that some of these items could include honor, understanding of personality traits, resolving anger, importance of touch, healthy communication, bonding, financial guidelines, and spiritual issues (pp. 147-8). A couple could agree that spending time each day in conversation is something they will commit

to. Mace and Mace (1988) suggest that it is a good idea to plan time daily or weekly for sharing and catching up with each other (p. 64). If this, among other items, were a part of a couple's constitution, it could help them remember to stay committed to their values in interacting.

Love maps and word pictures can also help partners communicate with each other. Love maps refer to information that couples have mapped out about each other (Adams, 17 October 2000). Love maps help couples "find ways of knowing one another and updating the information regularly" (Marano, 1997, p. 4). Items on a person's love map of their partner may include what his or her partner's favorite type of music is, what stressors he or she is currently facing, who his or her best friends are, and more (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 1). Love maps are an easy way to learn more about one's partner through asking questions and allowing a person to give detailed responses. Couples may discover that they understand one another better after creating detailed love maps. Likewise, word pictures can help couples understand each other by allowing them to convey feelings in a figurative way (Smalley, 1996, p. 155). Word pictures allow one partner to understand the other by allowing visualization of what the speaker is experiencing. For example, one person might say, "I feel as if you're standing on my foot" to communicate a feeling (Smalley, 1996, p. 155). This allows one's partner to place himself or herself in the speaker's shoes.

If couples can be very direct with each other when communicating, their interactions will be more successful as well. "Open, honest and constructive communication is the mother of total relationship satisfaction" (Hughes, 2001, p. 1). It is easy for individuals in a relationship to hint at each other rather than be direct about what

they want (DeAngelis, 1995, p. 16). This can be dangerous, because disappointments which lead to conflict could occur. In the case of one couple, a woman was disappointed because her husband did not surprise her by reserving a hotel room on their anniversary. When she seemed down, and he asked her what was wrong, she replied with “‘Oh, nothing’” (Barnes & Barnes, 1998, p. 37). She hinted at what she wanted, but the couple ran into the problem of mind-reading, which the husband could not do. Later, both could conclude that “‘It may seem unromantic and unspontaneous to have to explain to your spouse the things you want from them, but it certainly saves both parties from disappointment’” (Barnes & Barnes, 1998, p. 37). It is a myth that if people love each other, they will automatically be able to know what their partners feel, think, want, and need (Crosby 1991, p. 88). Being direct in communication can help a couple understand each other better and result in more of each individual’s needs being met.

Staying positive is another way to promote success in communication. Using “do” statements rather than “don’t” statements can be effective in telling one’s partner what is wanted (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 209). For example, a person would say “‘Please keep at least a fourth of a tank of gas in the car,’” rather than “‘Don’t leave the car without gas’” (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 209). Using positive statements can help couples communicate simple information in a way that prevents conflict and encourages good results for both parties (Steyn, 2001, p. 1). Couples can also give each other positive reinforcement to encourage successful communication. “‘These positive references may be in the form of compliments’” (Knox & Schacht, 2000, p. 209). Thank yous, complements on looks and good deeds, as well as smiles and touch can encourage partners to continue the satisfactory acts. This will increase satisfaction in a relationship.

Smalley (1996) suggests that people take turns smothering each other with verbal praise for approximately 60 seconds and claims that “It’s fun and enriching” (p. 152). Every individual deserves to feel loved and respected, and when couples can communicate in ways that convey these appreciates, satisfaction will result for the partners.

Conclusion

Anyone who has seen the movie With Honors can recite the piercing statement Simon writes to Monty, “You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.” Simon’s statement applies directly to the topic of successful communication. When a person can get to another through communication in an intimate relationship as well as be known, individual growth is inevitable. Successful communication can be defined as interactions which allow couples to go beyond information sharing and express deeper thoughts and feelings. The purpose in communicating successfully is to bring life to a relationship, promote individual growth, prevent dissatisfaction and divorce, and bring love and intimacy to a couple. The two main forms of communication include verbal and nonverbal communication. Couples should be aware of the weight that nonverbals carry, and work at having their nonverbals and verbals match up.

In order to communicate about more than facts in a relationship, couples should consider conversing on a wide variety of issues, being sure to include their opinions and feelings on each. Doing so will help individuals progress from the first three surface levels of communication (cliches, facts, and opinions) to the more intimate levels where feelings and needs are expressed. Couples should be aware of factors that could affect the success of their transmissions including commitment, family background, skill level, gender, compatibility, and setting. Several techniques can help couples overcome

differences and communicate well even in conflict. Two important techniques are use of “I messages” and reflective listening. When couples communicate successfully in conflict, they will experience positive outcomes. Other techniques exist and can be implemented by couples to help enhance communication. These include establishing a constitution, creating love maps, using word pictures, being direct, and staying positive. Although many people would agree that communication is essential in a relationship, few understand what is necessary for success. Awareness of the types of interactions needed for fulfilling transmissions can help partners grow individually and as a couple. For those who choose to challenge themselves and venture into deeper levels of communication, many benefits will become apparent for both persons involved in a relationship. And that is what success is all about.

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